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ABSTRACT

School report cards can help focus the conversation about a school's long-range goals and how they might be achieved, and then provide the means to track progress from year to year. This document describes the characteristics of good report cards, the relationship of report cards to local decision making, and ways to link reports to school improvement. It also describes the criteria used by states to determine their educational progress. Every state in the Southern Regional Education Board region now produces an "educational accountability" report. The first report cards focused on information about social and economic conditions; current ones tend to emphasize results. To be effective, states must link effective educational report cards with local school-improvement efforts. Ownership, cooperation, and consensus on standards are vital. Multiple years of comparable data are needed to show progress on student performance. Improving student achievement is a continual process. (LMI)

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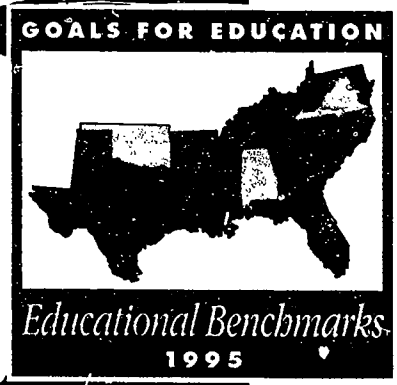

Linking Education Report Cards and Local School Improvement

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SREB

Southern Regional Education Board

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GOALS FOR EDUCATION

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity.

SREB Goals for Education
Commission for Educational Quality, 1988

Improve student achievement—that's the bottom line of efforts to improve education in the 1990s. You don't have to read the fine print to get the message. What matters most to leaders in SREB states today are results and accountability.

Recent legislative actions also reflect a growing consensus that local districts and schools should have more authority to make decisions about teaching and learning—and they should be *accountable* for those decisions.

As policymakers move more decision-making to the front lines, many states are relying on education "report cards" to monitor and publicize local school performance. Early versions of these report cards focused on information about social and economic conditions and other factors that might explain why students didn't learn enough. Today's report cards tend to emphasize *results*. They tell us how well students are doing compared to standards of performance.

Some education report cards focus on the district; others reach all the way to the school or classroom. State leaders believe this strong emphasis on reporting results can bring about a positive change in the educational culture of schools, districts, and state education agencies as well.

But education report cards have to improve if states are to have local decision-making and accountability standards. Unless states link effective education report cards and local school improvement efforts, the outcome is likely to be failing grades all around. That's why SREB continues its reports and meetings with state leaders on education report cards, and why we believe this work is important for your state.

Mark D. Musick, President
Southern Regional Education Board

(95E02)

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Linking Education Report Cards and Local School Improvement

"Report cards...make those responsible for schools—from the governor to classroom teachers—accountable for their performance."

Tennessee Governor Ned McWherter, 1994

"Any opportunity for the community and the schools to share information and look at ways to improve is beneficial."

School district superintendent Ben Canada, 1994

Every SREB state now produces an "education accountability" report.

The first report cards in most states included facts and figures about the state and school districts, with an emphasis on "input" measures (district and community characteristics, student characteristics, finance, and counts of teachers and other staff). While these indicators do not measure quality, they can help define the context in which schools and districts operate. Measures that have more to say about quality and progress—like standardized test scores, performance on Advanced Placement examinations, and dropout, graduation, promotion, and retention rates—were also included in some early state report cards.

More recently, many states have begun to require school-by-school reports that emphasize results for students—often comparing student performance and achievement to standards adopted by the state or the districts. (Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas are examples.)

Is your state's education report card changing in a fundamental and important way?

A North Carolina educator's description of how his state's report card has changed in just a few years describes the evolution of education report cards in many SREB states. The early reports, he said, had many pages of "little numbers" (school system characteristics, test scores, participation in Advanced Placement and so forth). These report cards included the educational level of parents, minority enrollment, students in compensatory education, and students receiving free and reduced-price lunches. They related student achievement in a school district to local conditions (or other districts with similar condi-

This report was prepared by Gale Gaines, Associate Director for State Services, and is based in part on a 1994 meeting of business leaders, legislative staff members, and state education department officials. Two other reports based on similar meetings have been published: *Report Cards for Education: Accountability in SREB States* (1991) and *School Accountability Reports: Lessons Learned in SREB States* (1992).

Basic Questions

When lawmakers and educators look at the education report cards in their states, these are good questions to ask:

- **What are the purposes for the education report cards in our state? Are they fulfilling those purposes?**
- **Do the reports clearly show strengths and weaknesses?**
- **Are the reports clear, understandable, and widely distributed?**
- **Are the reports being used to improve education?**

tions) and predicted what a school or school district's performance should be, *given its set of conditions*, rather than measuring a district's performance against a set of goals or standards.

More recently, North Carolina's report cards have evolved from this kind of model, which emphasized a school system's constraints, toward a model than emphasizes student proficiency. The newer reports, for example, include detailed information about the percentages of students who are proficient in English, mathematics, science, and other subjects. North Carolina began its new reporting in school districts. In the spring of 1995, the school districts will use the same proficiency model to produce report cards for every school.

Some states are tying report cards to school improvement

In some states (including Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Virginia, and West Virginia), the primary purpose of report cards has been to inform policymakers, parents, the public, and the press about school and school district performance. South Carolina took the process a step further by requiring individual schools to use state-compiled school performance data to prepare local improvement plans.

More recently, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas have raised the performance "stakes" by tying district and school report cards to comprehensive systems of school improvement and accountability. These accountability systems generally involve setting standards, developing an improvement process, issuing reports on progress in meeting the standards, and applying consequences based on reported results.

Other states are moving toward similar systems of accountability. Mississippi has created an Office of Educational Accountability within the state department of education and is beginning to include some school-by-school data in its school district reports. In Georgia, at the request of the governor, the 1993 legislature created the Council for School Performance to help establish benchmarks for school performance and accountability. Using the National Education Goals as a foundation, the Council has developed an indicator system for school performance and is pilot-testing it during the 1994-95 school year. The Georgia plan calls for phasing in school-level reporting on the indicators over a three-year period, beginning with high schools in 1996.

Virginia's Champion Schools Commission, created by the governor, has recommended an accountability system that would mandate learning standards for all schools, tie school report cards to those standards, and spell out the consequences for schools that fail to meet standards. Proposed standards in mathematics, science, social studies, English, and language arts have been published for review and public hearings.

Education Report Cards and Local Decision-Making

"The concept is simple: Give schools more flexibility to do what's best for their students and then hold them accountable for the outcomes."

Florida newspaper editorial, 1994

"Student achievement is improving because local educators have enthusiastically accepted the challenge to do what they think works best for their students."

Texas Commissioner of Education, 1994

School-by-school report cards are part of a move by states to shift the action from the state capital to the local classroom by spotlighting student progress, or lack of progress, in every school. This notion of accountability assigns responsibility for student performance to local educators, but it also grants them more flexibility to get the job done. With this shift, states are realigning the roles and responsibilities of state department of education staff, school district administrators, principals, and teachers.

State departments of education are attempting to become more customer- and service-oriented by emphasizing the assistance they can provide to districts and schools (although many departments still have the responsibility to intervene when schools or districts fail to improve).

State departments in several states are in the process of reorganizing with the aim of being more responsive to local needs. Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee have waived or eliminated numerous state regulations. In Tennessee, an estimated 3,700 rules were revoked, and the education department's staff is now intended to serve primarily as a resource to local school systems. Legislatures in Florida and North Carolina combined separate funding categories to allow districts and schools more spending flexibility, which also relieves the state department of certain regulatory functions.

Just shifting decision-making to the front lines isn't enough

Many state leaders believe that individual schools must have more control over important decisions about teaching and learning. But some local educators are not certain what is expected of them. In the past, local school officials often complained that too much state control hindered their ability to improve student performance. But in those states where more control and accountability has shifted to the local level, some educators now say they lack the resources, training, or personnel to cope with the new system.

North Carolina, notes one legislative staff member, has traditionally had a centralized governance structure. As flexibility and accountability moved from the state to the school district office and then to the individual school building, it soon became apparent that principals and teachers needed more preparation to assume their new decision-making responsibilities. To address the problem, North Carolina is investing in more leadership training at the school level.

In some states, school district administrators and school board members have been reluctant to share control with principals and teachers in individual schools. While advocates of local control imagine a new role for school boards and district central offices as coordinators and resource managers, many superintendents and board members prefer the traditional arrangement.

This problem was recently documented in Florida. Florida's Blueprint 2000 reform plan provides for state goals and standards but gives schools more authority and flexibility than before to achieve them. While the state completes its new standards, local schools are expected to exercise their new decision-making authority. But a recent state auditor general's report claims that the transition to school-level control is slow to take hold.

The auditors found, for example, that when the state eliminated strict categorical funding for schools, some school districts simply reimposed the same categories on the schools, leaving them with no more control or flexibility than they had before. "Educators appear to be bound by past practices . . . and are reticent to change," the Florida auditor general concluded.

Some states involve the community through school-based councils

In some states, state-mandated school councils have created new roles and responsibilities for parents, business leaders, and other members of the public in the implementation of educational reforms and the operation of schools.

School administrators are expected to supply school councils with detailed facts and figures about schools and student performance that have not been routinely shared with the public before. School councils—made up of teachers, parents, business leaders, and other community members—are now privy (or should be privy) to budgets, revenue and expenditure reports, planning documents, student achievement data, and other information that can be used to develop school improvement plans.

But the degree of interaction and cooperation between school officials and school councils can vary tremendously, depending on the leadership capabilities of the principal

and the principal's commitment to community involvement.

Conflicts can also arise between school councils and district school boards. In Florida, a conflict developed when a local school board amended a school's improvement plan without agreement from the school council. The board's authority to amend the plan was questioned because the law states that the local board is to "annually approve" a school improvement plan for each school in the district. A lawsuit was filed but before it went to trial a compromise was reached. The school amended its plan and the board then approved it. (There was a strong incentive to reach a compromise—district lottery funds are withheld if a district fails to approve an improvement plan for each of its schools.) A mediation process is being developed in Florida to assist when future conflicts arise.

Can states allow more flexibility and still have comparability?

Education report cards emerged, in part, from the desire of state and local decision makers to compare educational information across schools and school districts. Accurate comparisons require comparable data. But how can data remain comparable if every school or school district has the flexibility to decide what and how it will teach—and what tests and assessments it will use?

All SREB states have common elements in their education reports—for example, attendance rates or standardized test results—that allow comparisons among schools and districts. Some reporting programs also "cluster" schools or school districts for comparison—usually by identifying those with similar characteristics. For example, Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas group schools or districts using factors like minority enrollment, district size, and the percentage of students in free lunch programs. Early reports in Georgia, Louisiana, and North Carolina also used "cluster" comparisons.

Mississippi's new accountability system uses a variety of indicators to rank school districts, including test scores, enrollment and attendance data, socioeconomic and school finance information, teacher credentials, and information about special student groups (gifted, vocational, Chapter 1, and special education). In other states, such as Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, and Virginia, no comparison groupings are made and reporting is designed to mark the progress of each school over time.

Whether or not states methodically group schools and districts for comparison purposes, an argument can be made that schools and districts need to report some information in common to insure progress toward state goals, to identify highly successful schools and programs, or to help determine the best allocation of scarce resources.

Most states have identified certain information that all schools or districts are required to include in the report cards they produce. Other information is often provided as well. For example, a school with a high proportion of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students might want to highlight the specific performance and progress of LEP students, even though state regulations don't require it.

The best school reports include information on the progress of local improvement plans; they clearly identify goals and measures of acceptable progress; and they report on student performance in those terms.

Linking Reports to School Improvement

"This whole reporting thing intertwines into everything else. All of a sudden you are asking significant questions about whether you have a valid curriculum, whether it is really working, whether it is what you want children to be able to do. You really can't disengage reporting from everything else."

Legislative staff member, 1994

"The results released last week are just the beginning of a mass of data. How much good the information does us depends on how smart we are about spotting the patterns and acting on the results."

North Carolina newspaper editorial, 1994

Officials in many states agree that accountability and public reporting go hand-in-hand with school improvement efforts. It's not enough, they say, to release accountability reports. The information needs to be put to work improving student performance.

The school-based councils and committees established in many SREB states are a logical place for this process to begin. When principals and school staffs are willing, councils can help develop improvement plans based on the strengths and weaknesses at the school. Many of those strengths and weaknesses can be found by studying the data used to produce school-by-school report cards—and supplementing it where necessary.

To help this process along, some states and local school systems are beginning to actively link school-by-school accountability reports with improvement efforts.

In Virginia, some district superintendents require their schools to use reports from the state's Outcome Accountability Project to develop their school plans. And school reports in Florida must use data to track each school's progress toward meeting needs identified in the school's improvement plan. Florida taxpayers can look at the data and see if the improvement plan is addressing the needs. This kind of reporting, one Florida official said, allows parents to "get involved and ask why they are painting the school or paving the parking lot if the test scores are what is really killing the school."

In Louisiana, the school reporting process has been described as "putting things on the table and making people actually look at it." Louisiana's first education report cards were viewed with great suspicion by local educators. Although some principals remain uncomfortable with the idea of publicly reporting detailed information about school performance, annual improvements in the reporting process have won many educators over, and more schools and districts are now making the connection between data analysis and planning for school improvements.

Schools need help to use data effectively

Learning to use detailed information to plan for improvement is an evolutionary process for most schools. Some are much further along than others. Most educators have little or no training in analyzing a variety of data to make judgments about the effectiveness of school programs.

Schools need help in seeing connections between data reported, what is happening in the school, and what should be done about it, says one state department of education staff member with local experience. "It's the district's role to help school staff see these connections," she says.

The linkages between the number of over-aged students in fourth grade and the test results in third grade reading may not be clear to teachers and principals with little or no experience working with data. Simply releasing data to schools will most likely result in little or no action toward improvement. Principals and teachers need training and support as they learn to work together to develop action plans based on good data.

Virginia has assisted schools and districts in making sense of reported data and putting it to use. One basic strategy is to slowly build on people's experience in interpreting data. State and district staff have been talking about the use of data and how it fits into improvement for a few years, says one Virginia department of education official, but many local school educators and advisory council members are new to the process. "They see the report card, but they don't see how it fits into improvement planning. They need help in learning to think about how to use data."

To help spur this kind of thinking, district staff members sit down with school teams and study the report card data together. They may say: "Your sixth grade Literacy Passport scores are too low, and you've indicated this is something you want to work on." The district staff members help the school team identify any indicators that may be related to performance on the Literacy Passport test—such as attendance and grade-level performance on standardized tests.

Part of the process is showing parents, teachers, and other school level staff that data are readily available and that they can begin asking important questions to improve learning. "Where do we seem to be having the most problems?" "What things are going on in those areas that aren't working well?" "What might be done to improve?"

In one Virginia district, principals were brought together and asked to brainstorm about various causes for low Literacy Passport scores. The principals then went back to their own schools and conducted the same kind of discussion among their school team members and faculty. The information was collected for the entire district and used to identify key problems that could be attacked districtwide. This kind of process recognizes that actions in individual schools can support the district's vision for educational improvement, and in turn, support the vision of the state as a whole.

In Texas, many superintendents and principals did not know where to start when they received reports from the Academic Excellence Indicators System. The state department of education began offering workshops and presentations in districts and at state gatherings—both to share ideas about using the data and to listen to suggestions on how to improve the reports.

School teams are still learning to set priorities

Schools that use detailed information to identify problems may end up uncovering more difficulties than they can effectively address at one time. Many schools make the mistake of trying to improve everything at once, eventually losing their focus and their motivation.

Virginia has found that school teams tend to address a problem by planning as many activities as possible. "If they want to improve math, for example, they will list 25 things they are going to do during the school year: have a parent open house, send home curriculum summaries, and so on," says a Virginia state educator.

"And multiply that by the more than 40 indicators in the reports," she says. "They want to improve everything at once. But what they really need to do is implement those activities that will give the most benefit."

School teams with little experience in using data may not look far enough for explanations. A low test score may trigger numerous suggestions for improvement without much thought given to the root cause of the problem. Admittedly, this is the most challenging task for anyone using data. It requires teams to look beyond the numbers and gather additional information about current programs and teaching practices in the problem areas identified *by* the numbers.

When schools and advisory councils reach this point in the process of thinking about improvement, they will be more apt to avoid what some call the "shrubs mentality"—the impulse to focus on matters that are easier to tackle than the learning process, including everything from extra-curricular activities to the plants and shrubs around the building.

School systems can use data to see education's "big picture"

In the past, educators haven't had all the information they need to follow student progress as they move from elementary to middle to high school. And communication between principals and teachers at different schools is often minimal. "I really wonder what the algebra teachers at the high school are teaching," an eighth-grade math teacher told an SREB researcher. "I don't think we pay enough attention to the connections between what we teach and what they teach."

Alert school districts can use report card data to spot curriculum and other coordination problems between upper-level schools and their "feeders." After analyzing its report card data, one Florida school district amended a high school improvement plan so that high school and middle school teachers could meet together to discuss their course content and come up with ways to better prepare students for the transition from middle school to high school.

High schools also serve as feeders—for colleges and post-secondary vocational and technical schools. For years states have tried to promote more discussion between high schools and colleges, on the theory that each has something important to tell the other about curriculum content, effective instruction, and student performance. Education report cards provide a new way for school and college educators to increase this exchange.

Louisiana and Oklahoma, for example, now report on the performance of first-time college freshmen in their school-by-school and district reports. Many other states that require public colleges to provide this information to schools could easily add it to report card requirements.

Standards, Expectations, and Resulting Actions

"It's like good cop, bad cop. People who get to talk about school improvement look good. People who talk about accountability are rats."

State Department of Education staff member, 1994

When states tie their school improvement systems to accountability reporting, what criteria do they use to determine progress?

In Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas, all schools are required to meet specific standards. In Florida, during its three-year transition to Blueprint 2000, standards and adequate progress are determined at the school level. Oklahoma has a system to identify troubled "high challenge" schools that must develop improvement plans.

In many states, a failure to improve can lead to sanctions. States are also implementing reward programs for schools that meet standards or make progress. South Carolina has had a school incentive program in place for more than a decade. Newer reward programs in Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Texas provide cash bonuses for achieving goals or for a satisfactory level of progress.

Here are several examples of how states are applying standards at the local level:

- Maryland's School Performance Program sets high standards for all schools—without regard to socioeconomic conditions. Schools have five years to show progress before the law's full accountability provisions take effect, including state intervention in schools that show few signs of progress.
- The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act also sets high standards that schools are expected to reach, but the Act anticipates that it will take 20 years to reach them. Schools are judged by whether they close the gap (by one-tenth every two years) between their first-year performance and the standards. The legislature has agreed to postpone sanctions until 1996.
- Texas looks at whether groups of students within schools meet standards. In the current year, for a school to be rated "exemplary," 90 percent of all students *and* 90 percent of each identified student population group (African American, Hispanic, white, and economically disadvantaged) must pass each section of the state testing program.
- Tennessee's 1992 Education Improvement Act requires districts and schools to meet student performance goals tied to national increases on a standardized test of basic skills. A school's success is determined using an economic formula designed to measure the "value added" by a year of instruction in each subject tested.

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

Education Report Cards Can Make a Difference

"What is ahead? Only our imagination can suggest what that will be. In my view, five years from now if we are doing the same things we're doing now (in education reporting), we haven't done much."

State Department of Education staff member, 1994

Schools, districts, and states are having similar experiences as they implement school-by-school improvement and accountability programs. They are finding that:

- The school report card can serve as a means of accountability *and* as a tool for school improvement;
- Ownership, cooperation, and consensus on standards are vital;
- Multiple years of comparable data are needed to show progress on student performance;
- Improving student achievement is a process that never ends.

States are beginning to find that accountability reporting is one part of what might be called the "culture training" of school reform. The improvement and accountability process is really about changing the way people think and operate in the school. It provides a basis for bringing together those who have a stake in each school to discuss the school's primary business—teaching and learning. School report cards can help focus the conversation about a school's long-range goals and how they might be achieved—and then provide the means to track progress from year to year.

When teachers, principals, parents, and other community members work through this process together, they begin to see the important connections between data and results. They learn to be self-sufficient planners who are better able to meet the needs of their community school.

More Questions

- **Is there a system in place to make sure that school report cards provide all of the important information a school needs to improve?**
- **Do schools have the help they need to use the data in report cards effectively?**
- **Do schools have the flexibility to make changes suggested by the report card information?**
- **Do parents, teachers, businesses, and the community understand the report card information and how it can be used to improve schools?**
- **Are school report cards helping to assure accountability?**